

DETROIT NATIVE SUN

Michigan Supreme Court denies appeal of sentence from leader of White supremacist Org the Base

LANSING - On March 29th, the Michigan Supreme Court denied an application for appeal from Justen Watkins, 26, of Bad Axe, upholding Watkins' minimum sentence of 32 months' incarceration, announced Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel. Watkins sought to appeal an opinion from the Michigan Court of Appeals (COA) that upheld the sentence, finding the plea agreement and sentence evaluation by the Circuit Court were not ambiguous and Watkins' plea to Conspiring to Train for a Civil Disorder and Felony Firearm was not involuntarily made.

That opinion from the COA reversed a May 2023 Tuscola County Circuit Court order granting Watkins' motion for resentencing. Watkins' sentences of 32 months to 4 years' incarceration, and a mandatory consecutive 2 years' incarceration for the Felony Firearm conviction, will stand.

"This matter has reached a conclusion, and for that I am grateful, as the Michigan Supreme Court denied this sentencing appeal from the white supremacist hate group leader Watkins," said Nessel. "Watkins' convictions were never in question throughout this process, only his claimed sentencing ambiguity, which the Court of Appeals ruled does not exist. My office will not back down from prosecuting hate-based violent extremists to the fullest extent of the law."

In October 2020, Justen Watkins, the leader of The Base - a national white supremacist group that advocates for violence against the government - was charged in connection to a December 2019 incident in which a Dexter family was terrorized at their home. Watkins used intimidation tactics and posted messages to other members of The Base targeting the home.

The agencies involved in that investigation later discovered Watkins and two other members of The Base had entered two vacant properties formerly operated by the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) in Caro to assess the properties for The Base's paramilitary firearms training exercises, which the group called "hate camps."

The following charges, co-prosecuted with Tuscola County Prosecutor Mark Rene, were filed in the Tuscola County District Court against Watkins related to the activity at the MDOC property:

- one count of larceny in a building, a 4-year felony;
- one count of gang membership, a 20-year felony;
- one count of conspiracy to train with firearms for a civil disorder, 4-year felony; and
- one count of felony firearm, a 2-year felony.

On April 11, 2022, Watkins pled guilty to Conspiracy to Train for a Civil Disorder and Felony Firearm in a plea agreement stipulating Watkins to serve 32-months to 4-years' incarceration, and a second consecutive sentence of two years.

Watkins admitted in his plea to visiting the MDOC facility and conducting firearms training at the site with several others. He was then sentenced in accordance with the plea agreement.

Months later, Watkins filed motions in the Tuscola County Circuit Court to withdraw his plea, to change the presentence investigation report, and for resentencing. The Court granted the resentencing motion in May 2023 when the Court ruled ambiguity existed in the agreement that led to the sentencing. The trial court did not rule on Watkins' other motions.

Following the Michigan Court of Appeals' denial of the People's application for leave to appeal, the People filed an emergency application for leave to appeal in the Michigan Supreme Court. On June 30, 2023, the Michigan Supreme Court, in lieu of granting leave to appeal, remanded this case back to the COA for consideration.

In November 2023, the COA reversed the order of the Tuscola County Circuit Court granting resentencing, thus upholding the sentence as imposed pursuant to the plea agreement.

Watkins filed a motion to the Michigan Supreme Court to appeal that ruling of the COA, which the Court denied Friday.

Founded in 2018, The Base - which is the literal translation of "Al-Qaeda" in English - is a white supremacy gang that openly advocates for violence and criminal acts against the U.S. and purports to be training for a race war to establish white ethnonationalist rule in areas of the U.S., including Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The group also traffics in Nazi ideology and extreme anti-Semitism.

Dearborn man sentenced to 17 years in prison for sexually exploiting a child

DETROIT - A Dearborn resident was sentenced to 17 years in federal prison for sexually exploiting a child, United States Attorney Dawn N. Ison recently announced.

Ison was joined in the announcement by Chevoryea Gibson, FBI Special Agent in Charge, Detroit Field Division.

Haitham Sami Bazzi, 28, was sentenced by United States District Judge Terrence Berg.

According to court documents, Bazzi met the 16-year-old victim in an online dating application in the summer of 2021. Bazzi engaged in sex acts with the victim, provided the child methamphetamine, and recorded the sexual exploitation. A concerned adult reported Bazzi to the Dearborn Police after Bazzi showed him child sexually abusive material on Bazzi's phone. The Dearborn Police executed a search warrant and recovered multiple devices from Bazzi's residence, which police then turned over to the FBI for further investigation. The FBI analyzed the devices and found numerous images and videos of child sexually abusive material, including a video of the minor victim.

"Protecting our most vulnerable residents is one of my office's top priorities - we must do everything in our power to

protect our children from those who seek to cause them enduring harm. By seeking just punishment, we acknowledge this victim's trauma and hope that this sentence helps the child's journey toward a full recovery," U.S. Attorney Ison said.

"Our top priority is to protect our communities' youngest members from individuals who mean to take advantage of them. This sentencing and path to accountability would not be possible without the men and women of the Dearborn Police Department and the United States Attorney's Office," said Chevoryea Gibson, Special Agent in Charge of FBI Michigan. "I would also like to thank the concerned citizen who dared to stand up to Mr. Bazzi and speak for our victim by reporting his heinous crimes to law enforcement. As a member of the law enforcement community, we can achieve tremendous success in partnership with our concerned citizens. If you know of someone victimizing our youth, please call the FBI at 1-800-CALL-FBI, or you may submit an online tip at TIPS.FBI.GOV."

This case was investigated by the FBI and the Dearborn Police Department. This case was prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Christopher Rawsthorne and Tara Hindelang.

Descendants of 1811 Revolt Heroes Acquire Woodland Plantation to Preserve Black History



By Stacy M. Brown
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Jo Banner and Joy Banner, founders of The Descendants Project, have taken a significant step towards preserving the historical legacy of Black Americans by acquiring the Woodland Plantation in LaPlace, Louisiana. According to TheGrio, their unwavering commitment stems from a deep-rooted understanding of the plantation's pivotal role in history and a determination to authenticate its story.

Raised on the West Bank of the Mississippi River, Jo Banner and her sister Joy Banner were steeped in the tales of their grandmother, who recounted the harrowing events of the 1811 revolt by enslaved people. The uprising, often overshadowed in historical narratives, saw the brave resistance of individuals like Charles Deslondes and approximately 25 others who sought freedom amidst the brutal oppression of slavery.

The Banners' acquisition of the plantation marks a significant moment in the ongoing struggle to preserve Black history. After years of discussions with the previous owner, Timothy Sheehan, about safeguarding this heritage, the sisters finalized the purchase in January for \$750,000. With the transaction completed, they now hold stewardship over a property that witnessed one of America's largest uprisings of enslaved people.

Their nonprofit organization, The Descendants Project, focuses on preserving and protecting the Black descendant community in Louisiana's River Parishes. The Woodland Plantation, nestled in St. John the Baptist Parish, holds immense historical significance, encompassing 4,000 square feet of space on four acres of land.

According to Sharlene Sinegal-DeCuir, an associate professor of history at Xavier University, the Banners' initiative is profoundly impactful. It provides an opportunity for descendants of the enslaved to reclaim their narrative, offering a counterbalance to historical accounts that often marginalize their contributions.

In addition to preserving the plantation's history, the Banners said they intend to use the space as a hub for community engagement. By offering genealogy resources and facilitating discussions on environmental justice, they aim to create a welcoming environment where Black voices are heard and honored.

The fight against environmental degradation in the region, epitomized by Greenfield Louisiana LLC's proposed construction of a grain elevator export plant, underscores the ongoing struggle for justice. For Jo Banner, the significance of their ownership extends beyond mere property rights. It represents a reclaiming of space and identity, ensuring that future generations connect meaningfully with their heritage. As they embark on this journey, the Banners said they are determined to ensure that the Woodland Plantation remains a beacon of hope and empowerment for all who visit.

"Knowing that home's history and everything that happened, that our names are going to be put in the paperwork of this home, that you're going to see it going all the way from the 1700s and white ownership and all of a sudden that they got more melanin on that title history, we're already seeing how impactful that is for us to be in this space just as Black women," Jo Banner told The Grio. "We're going to provide access to the history in a way that Black people can feel welcome in the space."

Michigan man charged with federal hate crime offenses for defacing predominantly black church

DETROIT - David Bluer, 33, of Warren, Michigan, was charged late last month in connection with spray-painting swastikas and other graffiti on a church in Roseville, Michigan, and with spray-painting similarly racist graffiti on a public park bathroom in Warren.

According to the charging documents, in October 2021, Bluer spray-painted swastikas, the word "die" and other graffiti on the Roseville church, because of the race and color of individuals associated with the church. As specified in the charging documents, the Roseville church has a Black pastor and serves a predominantly Black congregation. In addition, Bluer spray-painted swastikas, a racist slur and symbols and other graffiti on the public bathroom of Trombly Park, in Warren. The racist graffiti included the statement "DAVID KILLS NIGGERS." Allegedly, Bluer acted because of the race and color of Black people who used the park, and be-

cause Black people were and had been enjoying the park.

Bluer was charged with one count of damaging a religious property and one count of interfering with federally protected activities. Bluer faces a maximum penalty of one year in prison for each misdemeanor charge.

United States Attorney for the Eastern District of Michigan Dawn N. Ison, Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, and Special Agent in Charge Chevoryea Gibson of the FBI Detroit Field Office made the announcement.

The FBI Detroit Field Office investigated the case.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Frances Carlson for the Eastern District of Michigan and Trial Attorney Erin Monju of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division are prosecuting the case.

An indictment is merely an allegation. All defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law

